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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S FAREWELL CALL ON PRESIDENTIAL CHIEF OF STAFF RAMIZ MEHDIYEV

Classified By: Ambassador Reno L. Harnish III per 1.4 (b,d).

¶11. (C) Summary: During the Ambassador's April 18 farewell call, Presidential Chief of Staff Ramiz Mehdiyev pledged that the May 13 parliamentary rerun elections would be transparent and free. To that end, Mehdiyev said he had warned the ExComs in regions where rerun elections will take place that fraud and interference in the electoral process would be severely punished. The Ambassador noted that Azerbaijan's democracy and human rights record would be an important part of President Aliyev's U.S. visit, and urged Mehdiyev to ensure that a meeting with democracy and human rights NGOs was added to the schedule. The Ambassador also said the U.S. hopes Aliyev will make major statements about his commitments to democracy and expansion of the East-West energy corridor during the visit. Mehdiyev urged the U.S. to take a more active role in the Nagorno-Karabakh negotiations, alleging that Russia plays a spoiler role in the talks. End summary.

¶12. (C) During the Ambassador's April 18 farewell call, Presidential Chief of Staff Ramiz Mehdiyev pledged that Azerbaijan's May 13 rerun elections for 10 parliamentary seats would be more transparent than the November elections. Mehdiyev said that President Aliyev wants truly "transparent and free elections." At Aliyev's instruction, Mehdiyev said he had called in the ExComs from all ten districts where reruns will take place and warned them that any case of government interference or use of administrative resources to influence the elections would be severely punished and prosecuted. Mehdiyev also said that he welcomed USG support for an exit poll during the rerun elections. Exit polling, in his view, is a "normal procedure." That said, he alleged that members of the opposition Azadliq bloc were trying to manipulate the exit poll's outcome, applying for jobs as exit pollsters in hopes of skewing the results so they can accuse the government of election fraud. The Ambassador assured Mehdiyev that the USG has full confidence that our implementing partner IRI would conduct the exit poll in an accurate, scientific and impartial manner.

¶13. (C) The Ambassador welcomed Mehdiyev's assurances on the conduct of the May 13 rerun elections. He also noted that the GOAJ decision to allow a large number of international and domestic observers would help strengthen the electoral process. The Ambassador urged the GOAJ to allow peaceful political assemblies in the run-up to the elections. Mehdiyev said that no parties had yet applied for permission to hold rallies but that any future request "would be viewed objectively."

¶14. (C) The Ambassador reviewed President Aliyev's upcoming trip to the United States. The Ambassador told Mehdiyev that

the U.S. hopes that President Aliyev will make major statements on his desire to strengthen Azerbaijan's democratic agenda, and on Azerbaijan's desire to expand and strengthen the existing East-West energy corridor. The Ambassador noted that Azerbaijan's progress on democracy and human rights would be an important part of the visit, and urged Mehdiyev to ensure that President Aliyev addresses these issues in a proactive manner. The Ambassador said he would very much like to see President Aliyev address a gathering of leading US democracy NGOs and urged Mehdiyev to make sure the meeting was added to the schedule.

¶15. (C) Mehdiyev asked the Ambassador whether a breakthrough on the Nagorno-Karabakh negotiations should be expected in Washington. The Ambassador responded that he hopes President Aliyev's visit will give an impetus to the negotiations. The Minsk Group Co-Chairs have worked closely with the parties over the last two years to develop an outline of a solution and the U.S. is hopeful that a resolution of the conflict can be achieved this year. Mehdiyev urged the U.S. to play a more active role in the negotiations, alleging that Russia is playing a spoiler role in the talks. Mehdiyev said that information from all of Azerbaijan's sources indicates that Russia -- "at the highest levels" -- has no interest in resolving the conflict. Mehdiyev alleged that Russia is not playing an objective role in the OSCE Minsk Group as it consistently defends Armenia's interests. The Ambassador assured Mehdiyev that the U.S. is deeply and seriously engaged in finding a solution, noting that Secretary Rice had discussed the issue with Foreign Minister Mammadyarov on April 7 and that Special Envoy for Eurasia Ambassador Steve Mann was in the region this week.

HARNISH